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MAXIM GORKY.¹

PROBABLY what attracted many readers to "Foma Gordyeff," the first long novel by Maxim Gorky, was the announcement spread far and wide that here was the successor of Tolstoy, and at first one who had come to the book with the expectation of finding this true feels a keen disappointment. Stylistically there is not the slightest resemblance. Gorky chooses his words because they seem apt from a rhetorical standpoint and his scenes for their dramatic significance; Tolstoy seems to choose his because with his personages it is not possible to choose others. There are many places where in the work of the younger man you stop and say, "How clever! brilliant! cutting!" and then you go back to see just how the thought is running. The artlessness of Tolstoy's style is paralleled by that of his plot. The lives and struggles of his chief characters are of such concern to him that there is given them a pulsing vitality that it is possible to find in the work of no other novelist. In reading "Foma Gordyeff" you wonder if there could have been such a man, but there is no wonder in the case of "Anna Karenina;" only pity and sympathy for her fate-dogged life.

There is a resemblance, however, closer than any external one could be, in feeling. Both of these men write from a sympathy with the down-trodden almost too deep for words, and they both write with that lack of silly optimism which those who do not think immediately denounce as pessimism. If pessimism means a weak surrender to evils too great for living, they are not pessimists; but if it means the open-eyed recognition of the fact that the condition of the world is just about as bad as it possibly could be at this day and time, then

¹"Foma Gordyeff." By Maxim Gorky. Translated from the Russian by Isabel F. Hapgood. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901. \$1.

"Orloff and His Wife." By Maxim Gorky. Translated by Isabel F. Hapgood. New York: Scribner's, 1901. \$1.

both are pessimists. But the word "pessimism" is not a deadly epithet even when applied to men whose strength is small, much less when applied to these two strong men. The one thing most deadening to all religion now is a calm and self-satisfied indifference that thinks that all is well because all of its narrow circle seems to be well; a pharisaical attitude of mind to which the blankest negation is to be preferred if only it can jolt into some sort of dissatisfaction. This is a service for tragedy and not for time destroyers. And to say that Gorky's work is of this type is at the outset to give it high praise.

"Foma Gordyeff" is a tragedy just as clearly as "Hamlet" is a tragedy. In both cases there is a soul-perplexed and weak struggling with problems too great for present solution, and in both cases the death that comes is a God-given relief. Foma's father and his mother are both out of the ordinary, made so perhaps to explain how there could be struck from the vicious selfishness of the Russian merchant class fire enough to show forth a soul. For this merchant class is brutal; brutal too not in the cold, thin style of American money getters, but with all the full-bloodedness and mass that we know as Russian for good or evil. The wealthy Russian merchant is only Tolstoy's most powerful and grasping peasant come to town and accommodated to the advanced ways of getting much for little. In his former weaker state the peasant saw men who were higher in the world than he seeking first money, houses, and land, and he sought them. By his own vigor he got them; and then he stops to think. His old aim of life (getting wealth) existing no longer as an aim, he has before him two things—to go on securing wealth which he sees he does not need, or to sit in idleness. The former, the American method, wears out the seeker and he has no life; and the other unlooses a volcano of passions, in the outbreak of which there is not the least consideration for a glozing etiquette. Now Ignat Gordyeff, Foma's father, belonged to the latter class, spending his time in alternate spasms of money-getting and of debauchery. This Ignat, who has never *lived*, who has never been out of the grasp of

the two animal instincts of acquiring wealth and of raging with lust, has the responsibility of setting a son out in the world. Life to him had meant getting money and going on sprees. There was no reason for his son Foma to get money; and there was left for him, logically from his father's example, nothing but debauchery. There is nothing in life more keenly pathetic or more common than the attempt that Ignat makes to talk seriously to Foma on the latter's return from his first business trip and his first debauch; the vanity of this father's trying to tell his son how to live when he himself never knew! There is the earnest desire of the father to say something at this crisis, the feeling that there has been done a wrong, the haste to have the unpleasant thing uttered, and the vain sinking back into commonplaces that must come when one man tries to restrain his brother from an evil that he does not see is an evil in his case also.

When Ignat dies, the son does not fall into sottishness because he has in him the disturbing element of a conscience. What made his father see, in crises, that there was an evil, is with Foma always, for his life is but one long crisis. He sees that the life that is lived around him is not life but death; but what resource is there against it? The thread of consistency that runs through his life is the feeling, now vague, now expressed, of the mystery of life: "I understand nothing, my dear fellow," he says at one time; "I simply wish to live." This is the reason for his succumbing to the physical charm of the peasant woman on his first trip, the blind effort to see into the mystery of life; this, the reason for debauch after debauch, for discussion after discussion, for the final outbreak at the Pharisee's dinner—the outbreak that made it possible for his fox of an uncle to cage him as insane.

Evidently this book is not one to be chosen if one seek mere amusement or an intellectual anæsthetic in the face of stern life. It is a tragedy, and, unlike the tragedy that we generally think of when this word is used, one that comes home to the heart of every man who looks at life with a mind and a conscience. By society to-day, with its widely printed and often spoken word of Christ, and its every organization

based on any principle save that of Christ, Gorky is tortured, and so he wrote the book. If any man is trying to think out these things, "Foma Gordyeff" will stimulate and enlighten him. It will give him no definite directions—no book can—but it will show him how the same life with which he is struggling strikes a man of genius and purpose. Gorky himself is struggling blindly with the world, but with great strength. He forces on his readers the reality of life, gives his best thoughts in reference to it, and then demands: "And what think you?"

The volume of short stories the name of which is given by the first, "Orloff and His Wife," are the powerful earnestness that Gorky gave of the power he was to show in the longer novel. All of these stories are simply patches of life; the truth is set down in plain language, and the readers are left to do their own thinking therefrom. We have space to mention only the piercing pathos of the sketch from life called the "Exorcism." This needs the author's note in his own person to assure us that his horror is not a page descriptive of the Middle Ages. All of these stories describe life in the lower strata of Russian society save one, and all save this one flow directly or indirectly from his perception that in very truth we men are all brothers in blood as surely as we are the sons of God. The one unpleasant story is that called "Varenka Olesoff," and it has no reason for existence—it neither teaches nor pleases.

GEORGE CLIFTON EDWARDS.